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## **Hong Kong**

### **Market Development Reports**

### **Bird Flu Resurfaces in Hong Kong**

## **2001**

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#### **Report Highlights:**

Chicken flu appears to have mounted its third and strongest attempt to return to Hong Kong since the disastrous bout of December 1997. The flu struck three different markets earlier this week, prompting the Hong Kong Government on May 16 to slaughter 6000 chickens. While the source of the flu has not yet been established, the Hong Kong Government seems confident that it will not spread to humans as occurred in 1997. Nevertheless, this latest outbreak of bird flu will exert more pressure for Hong Kong to move toward centralized slaughter of poultry to improve sanitary conditions.

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Hong Kong [HK1], HK

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On May 16, the Hong Kong Government took prompt action to slaughter 6000 chickens from all poultry stalls in three wet markets in different parts of Hong Kong, following the death of 800 chickens in these three markets within the preceding three days. The chickens died of a goose-type strain of the H5N1 virus. A Government official yesterday reported that the new H5N1 strain was first detected in early May in chickens at the three local markets. The Hong Kong Government says that gene tests indicate this H5N1 strain is different from the one which killed six people in 1997 and that this strain is unlikely to affect humans. To date, no cases of human flu in Hong Kong have been reported as being caused by this outbreak of bird flu. Nevertheless, the Hong Kong Government is taking decisive action against this outbreak. The poultry stalls in the three markets will be thoroughly sterilized and closed for at least 2 weeks and government scientists are tracing the source of virus.

Industry sources revealed that chicken deaths are very common during Hong Kong's very warm and humid summers. Each day about 100,000 live chickens are imported from China to Hong Kong. It is easy for chickens to get sick considering that they are packed closely together in cages in hot weather for long hours.

Despite the government's repeated claims that the virus is different from the one prevalent in 1997's bird flu crisis and that there is evidence of passing over to humans, the public's confidence in the safety chicken have inevitably suffered. Wholesale prices of chickens already have dropped 20% this week and retailers are expecting that sales will drop at least 40% over the next few days. It is possible that the consumption of frozen chicken will rise as consumers substitute it for the fresh product.

Hong Kong consumers' memories of the bird flu crisis in 1997, when H5N1 was detected in humans for the first time, are still fresh. A total of 18 people were infected and six died. By the time the crisis was over the government had slaughtered over a million chickens in Hong Kong. The importation of live chickens from China was also suspended. Hong Kong did not have live chicken supplies for months, which allowed the consumption of frozen chicken and red meats to surge.

Following the 1997 crisis, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department implemented stringent measures to prevent infected chickens from getting into the food chain. Measures currently include a new quarantine system ensuring that imported live chickens for slaughter from China are free of H5 viruses; mandatory central slaughtering of ducks and geese; stringent hygienic standards for local farms; and sample tests carried out on local farms every two months.

The Hong Kong Government has been considering to extend its central slaughtering requirement

to chickens, but has hesitated in the face of opposition from the live chicken industry and the public's desire to continue buying fresh slaughtered chicken at local markets. However, in the past few years, some Hong Kong consumers - especially the younger generation - have become accustomed to buying chilled and frozen chickens from supermarkets. Consumption patterns are moving gradually away from the preference for live chickens. Nonetheless, the welfare of the people in the industry, including chicken farms, remains a factor in the Hong Kong Government's attempt to encourage central slaughtering. Once the policy established, it is foreseeable that chilled and frozen chickens from China will replace local supplies. This resurgence of chicken flu may provide the Hong Kong Government with new ammunition to set up a central slaughtering policy for chickens, which is generally accepted as a deterrent to the spread of chicken flu.